

How the Presence of God Infiltrated One of the World's Darkest Corners

In Iran, underground Christian churches are spreading like wildfire, set ablaze as the name of Jesus Christ flickers in the shadows.

The power of the risen Savior is rocking this country to its core, prompting an unprecedented number of Iranians to abandon ritualistic faith in favor of one based in relationship. Converts covertly cluster in homes over shared Bibles, worshipping so softly they can't always hear themselves, let alone each other.

They meet quietly and carefully because in Iran, anything other than Islam can be considered anti-government. If the wrong neighbor finds out, the consequences could be dire.

"Their life is in danger, but they're coming to Christ because they feel that this is actually a true relationship," said Rashin Soodmand, a native of Iran. "They can see the presence of God."

The voices of the faithful might be muted, but their hearts are bursting. And this surge in Christian faith encourages Rashin. She understands firsthand the peril of having such devotion.

Her father was hanged for refusing to deny Christ.

Finding Faith

Hossein Soodmand, Rashin's father, was raised Muslim in the holy city of Mashhad. During his two-year military service, he was hospitalized with sickness, and a friend of his, an Armenian Christian, came to visit. The friend left Hossein

with a cross. That night, the young Muslim dreamed that Jesus Christ gave him something to eat. Hossein awoke sweating, realizing Jesus had healed him. Hossein accepted Christ into his heart.

Hossein's life was changed, and from that point forward, he devoted it to serving the Lord, even though that meant being rejected by his family.

Years later, Rev. Hossein Soodmand started a church in his home in Mashhad. A dozen or so Christians, many of them converts, would gather in the Soodmand's basement for the service. They sang worship songs without instruments and listened to a message while poring over hard-to-find copies of God's Word.

"It was great, actually," Rashin recalled. "I was very small so I always loved to go for the worship."

A preteen at the time, Rashin admitted with a laugh, "I did not like to stay for the preaching, but I always loved the worship."

Still, the Word of God had been impressed on young Rashin's heart, along with her father's unapologetic decision to follow Jesus Christ. She remembers her family gathering every night at 9 p.m. for Bible reading and prayer. At age 7, she had her own dream about Jesus Christ that solidified her faith.

"I saw Jesus and my father. They started walking forward, and they looked back and said, 'Follow me. Follow us,'" she recalled. "That's had a great impact on my life."

She made the decision to follow Jesus then, and stuck with it even though her Muslim classmates considered her unclean. It was stressful and there were challenges, such as explaining what she meant when she said her father was a pastor. But future trials promised to grow her even more.

Keeping Faith

The Islamic Republic was gathering steam in the early 1980s on the heels of the Iranian Revolution as Rev. Soodmand was evangelizing in Mashhad, Iran's holy Muslim city. Converting to Christianity wasn't just frowned upon by the new regime; it was unofficially considered a criminal activity, labeled anti-government.

Officials often closed the basement church and arrested Rashin's father several times. While detained, he was tortured psychologically and physically. But he never relented his call, meeting privately to teach and encourage his fellow Christians. And he never denied the name of Jesus Christ, even when officials promised death.

In late 1990, they made good on their promise. Rev. Soodmand refused to stop talking about Jesus, and he declined a well-intentioned offer from friends to flee. Officials arrested him one last time. He was hanged to death on Dec. 3, 1990, although the family didn't find out until two weeks later. By then, strangers had buried him in a dusty field the government reserved for the cursed. His family was forbidden from marking his grave in any way.

Rashin, just 13 at the time, was heartbroken. Even before his death, she couldn't fathom losing her father. He made a point to be close with all his children, and she fondly remembered their father-daughter dates to the coffee shop or restaurant. It was nothing fancy, just a chance to talk and listen.

"I could not imagine living without my father. Even when my father was with us, I was thinking, *If I don't have my father with me, I can't live anymore,*" Rashin said. "The day my father was persecuted, I don't know. I felt someone embrace me. I had an incredible peace.

"I was very sad. I was crying. Everybody was crying. For two years, it was not easy for us, but I could see that someone

[God] embraced us and hugged us and protected us.”

Sharing Faith

Ongoing persecution is a reality for many Christ-followers in this part of the world. Global watchdog Open Doors ranks Iran eighth out of the 50 countries most hostile toward Christians. The oppression is extreme, and Open Doors states that “arrest and violence are commonplace for anyone engaged in Christian ministry or evangelism.”

Bibles are not allowed to be printed there. In fact, Rashin said, the government has a public service announcement on local television, warning people to stay away from this book that can “change your life.”

“They thought that maybe they can change people’s minds from being a Christian, but I think that was one of the ways that God used to evangelize actually,” Rashin said. “Many people there are actually seeking for that Bible.”

Even under decades of rising persecution, the hunger for God’s Word has only strengthened. Rashin remembers in the years after her father’s murder, she would handwrite Scriptures and leave them in taxis or in restaurants. Once, she handwrote the entire Gospel of John and, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, left it on a stranger’s doorstep. Today, she advocates for Persian-translated Bibles in Iran. She has participated in many ministry endeavors and recently felt called along with her husband to shine a light on the persecution of Christians in their homeland.

The risks are real, but people who are converting from Islam to Christianity are willing to take them. That’s how strong the hunger is for actual relationship, Rashin said.

“Before the Islamic revolution, people were more religious than now,” Rashin said, referring to how her father’s parents rejected him. “But now, people are extremely open to Christ.

“[Iranian people] truly are seeking for God. They love God, and they would love to have a relationship with God, so that’s why they are praying five times a day.”

But repeating a prayer, she added, especially out of fear of punishment, isn’t nearly as inviting as the love-based relationship Jesus offers. A direct result has been a surge in house churches.

Jesus’ name is whispered among trusted friends, shared among close-knit families and occasionally broadcast on local televisions when certain satellite channels make their way through. Hearts are being changed for eternity.

There’s a desire to know more about Jesus. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of Iranians have visited the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s website—an interactive site that explains the Gospel—and more than 47,000 have indicated decisions for Jesus Christ. Additionally, Elam, a Christian ministry focused on Iran, has attempted to track in-country statistics. The site states that in 1979, fewer than 500 Christians were known in the area. Today that number eclipses 350,000.

On the surface, this might not seem evident because so few churches operate in plain view, where they are required to conduct government-supervised services. But underground, Elam reports, churches are multiplying quickly as the hearts of Muslims grow disillusioned with Islam and soften toward the love of Jesus Christ.

Rashin has seen that herself.

“As soon as they found out that in Christianity, they can get into the presence of God, and it’s free to have a relationship with God and fellowship with Him and experience that, that’s why they are coming to Christ.” {eoa}